DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 676 SO 014 580

AUTHOR Styer, Sandra
TITLE Selecting Women's Biographies for the Social Studies.
PUB DATE Feb 83
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Biographies; Elementary Education; *Evaluation Criteria; *Females; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Reading Material Selection; Sex Bias; Sex Stereotypes; *Social Studies; *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

To assist elementary teachers committed to integrating women's studies into social studies, criteria which should be met by juvenile biographies of women are discussed and illustrations from biographies are provided. Examples of what to consider when selecting biographies follow. In a sexist biography, heroines portray sexist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors learned as a result of being socialized in a sexist society. Repeated references are made to the heroines' physical appearance, suggesting that the heroine is quite unlike or superior to most women. In contrast, in a nonsexist biography, the descriptive background information is free of sexist judgments and interpretations. All characters are portrayed without sexism, women who have functioned as role models for the heroines are recognized, relationships with other women which have been a source of reciprocal support and power are depicted, and career success and personal happiness are not portrayed as mutually exclusive. (RM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED231676

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sandara Styer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SELECTING WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHIES FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

by

Sandra Styer

February, 1983

SP 014 580

SELECTING WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHIES FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

As instructional materials for elementary social studies, women's biographies can compensate for the paucity of women in social studies textbooks. They can promote the comprehension and appreciation of women's experiences and contributions throughout history and in contemporary society through their portrayals of strong, successful women.

Standard criteria for assessing the often highly fictionalized juvenile biography are necessary but insufficient for evaluating women's biographies which may be ranked on a continuum from nonsexist to quite sexist. It is critical that juvenile women's biographies be reviewed and selected from a nonsexist perspective. To accomplish this, special criteria may be utilized.

The objective reporting of characters' validated sexist attitudes and behavior can enhance the authenticity of the biography. It is the biographer's sexist bias in selecting and reporting which must be identified. Special questions need to be considered. Upon what bases were biographical materials selected or rejected, emphasized or relatively neglected? From what perspectives were events interpreted? Does the dialogue and action in fictionalized biography indicate that the biographer has achieved unbiased, legitimate characterizations? Similarly, has the dialogue

SDSU 410 S85

and action in authentic biography been objectively selected for authenticity rather than the creation of a character mirroring the values of the biographer? Is descriptive background information free of sexist judgments and interpretations?

In a nonsexist biography, the reader discovers the continuities in a women's life from childhood through adulthood. The goals, interests, abilities and personality characteristics predictive of future achievements and experiences are portrayed as developmental. Frequently, biographical heroines were independent children strongly resistant to conforming to traditional expectations for feminine behavior. There should be no reluctance in describing such characteristics. If the heroine pursued activities traditionally assigned to boys, this should be documented. Such authenticity facilitates readers' positive identification and modeling. For example, readers of Little Women will be fascinated by Cornelia Meigs' Newbery Award biography Louisa (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968) which confirms the close relationship between Louisa May Alcott's childhood and that of Jo in Little Women.

Repeated references to the heroine's physical appearance should alert the reader to sexism. These references can create the image of a woman whose identity was dependent upon conformance or nonconformance to some stereotyped contemporary standard of beauty. The biographer of an accomplished heroine judged beautiful by conventional standards has an opportunity to illustrate how such women can gain recognition for their

intellectual and personal-social qualities. That Fanny Kemble's roles as celebrated, beautiful actress and sensitive abolitionist writer were not incompatible was convincingly depicted in John Anthony Scott's Fanny Kemble's America (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973).

The biography of a fulfilled, accomplished but less stereotypically "beautiful" woman can serve as an antidote for the belief in the mythical relationship between beauty and happiness. Eleanor Roosevelt's positive attitude in a society which valued "beauty" was exemplified in Margaret Davidson's The Story of Eleanor Roosevelt (New York: Four Winds Press, 1968). In a school composition fifteen-year-old Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: "It may seem strange, but no matter how plain a woman may be, if truth and loyalty are stamped upon her face, all will be attracted to her and she will do good to all who come near her, and those who know her will always love her, for they will feel her loyal spirit and have confidence in her." (p. 32)

Women from diverse cultures and historical periods have had to cope with sexism. Experiences with biographies can raise students' consciousness of the impact of sexism upon women's social relationships and career development. Biographical heroines can offer readers superior models for creatively and positively coping with sexism. One of the positive strategies reported in Shannon Garst's Amelia Earhart, Heroine of the Skies (New York: Julian Messner, 1947) was Amelia's reaction to reporters who questioned her plans to combine marriage and

a career. She responded to their sexist questions with another question: "Mr. Putnam (her future husband) is not giving up his work. Why should I give up mine?" (p. 97) Biographies of women who have achieved despite discouragement and lack of support can be inspirational.

Having been socialized in a sexist society, heroines may have sexist attitudes, beliefs and behaviors which should be documented. Depicting both the sexist and nonsexist components of the heroine's personality and lifestyle contributes to the biography's realism and credibility. Proposing the origin of sexist attributes and delineating the development of the heroine's consciousness of sexism increases the readers' insight into the dynamics of sex discrimination.

Simply acknowledging the impact upon minority women's lives of sexism and racism as independent entities may not be sufficient. Often the combined effects of sexual and racial prejudice is more multiplicative than additive and should be reported. In James Haskins' Barbara Jordan (New York: The Dial Press, 1977), the heroine encountered this dual discrimination when her application to a prestigious law school was rejected.

Suggestions or inferences that the heroine was quite unlike or superior to most women can create a negative image of women. The heroine is then less plausible as a model. Equally objectionable are attempts to convince the reader that the heroine is an "average" woman conforming to common sex-role stereotypes.

In a nonsexist biography, all characters should be portrayed without sexism. Demeaning and stereotyped characteri-

zations of males are in contradiction with a humanistic philosophy. Males who have encouraged the heroine's development and success should be acknowledged. In Rachel Baker and Joanna Baker Merlen's America's Woman Astronomer (New York: Julian Messner, 1960), Maria Mitchell's father, an amateur astronomer, was recognized for his critical influence on her development as an astronomer and the discoverer of a comet. Biographical models of supportive male friends, colleagues and family members can demonstrate the value of male-female relationships.

Women who have functioned as role models for the heroine should be recognized. The lives of Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Mary McLeod Bethune are reviewed in detail in Susan Brownmiller's Shirley Chisholm, A Biography (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971). These three political women particularly intrigued the teen-aged Shirley Chisholm because they were fighters for causes.

Relationships with other women which have been a source of reciprocal support and power should be depicted. The value of women's friendhips in the pursuit of common goals was depicted in Mary Stetson Clarke's Bloomers and Ballots, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Women's Rights (New York: Viking 1972). Stanton's mutually supportive relationships with Susan B. Anthony and other women were of both personal and historical significance.

Reporting involvement in the women's movement or any commitment to women's right issues illustrates women's assumption of responsibility for the welfare of other women. Biographies can demonstrate that women in very diverse roles

have advanced women's rights. For example, in Olive Burt's First Woman Editor, Sarah J. Hale (New York: Julian Messner, 1960), the heroine wrote a series of articles in her nineteenth century Godey's Lady's Book promoting the higher education of women.

The satisfactions and rewards of pursuing a career and contributing to society should be recognized. A realistic approach to conflicts among sometimes competing roles in women's lives is important but it is imperative that career success and personal happiness are not portrayed as mutually exclusive. In Doris Faber's Bella Abzug (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1976), there were repeated references to the invaluable support of Bella Abzug's husband in encouraging her achievement and sharing childrearing responsibilities. Depicting the multifaceted personalities and lives of heroines can introduce readers to some successful methods of organizing and managing the complex demands of career and family.

Biographies of women who have been well known as relatives of famous men may present special problems. Portrayals of these women primarily in relation to men trivialize their individuality and contributions. While the importance of the woman's relationship to the famous man should be recognized, it should not disproportionately dominate the biography. Accomplished women who have established an identity separate from that of their husbands/sons/fathers merit biographies conveying their autonomy. Coretta King, in Paula Taylor's Coretta King, A Woman of Peace (Mankato, Minnesota: Creative

Education, 1974), was portrayed as a very talented, achievement-oriented woman preceding, during, and following her marriage to Martin Luther King, Jr.

While documented discrimination against single women should be reported, the increasing acceptance of single life as a legitimate option should be reflected in women's biographies. Patronizing judgments or stereotypical interpretations of a woman's single status are inappropriate. Mary Cassatt was portrayed in Robin McKown's The World of Mary Cassatt (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972) as a single woman whose commitment to her artistic career, successful living abroad and friendships with fascinating individuals of both sexes illustrated the potential of single life. Portrayals of single women dealing competently and happily with their unique challenges suggest to readers that this is a viable alternative life style.

While all of these criteria may not be met in some very important biographies, they can assist teachers committed to integrating women's studies into social studies. These criteria shared with students can raise their consciousness and develop their ability to evaluate and appreciate women's biographies.

While women who have been portrayed in sexist biographies need to become the heroines of new nonsexist biographies, the existing sexist biographies can provide supplementary materials for developing students' evaluative skills in the interim. When both sexist and nonsexist biographies of the same woman are available, there are excellent opportunities for comparative

analyses of alternative approaches to portrayal and dexcription. As contemporary juvenile biographers are influenced by the women's movement, nonsexist values should be increasingly evident in women's biographies. Children who experience superior women's biographies will be more knowledgeable about the times and places in which the heroines lived and will eventually be more discriminating adult readers of women's and men's biographies.

REFERENCES

Baker, Rachel and Merlen, Joanna Baker. America's Woman Astronomer. New York, N.Y.: Julian Messner, 1960.

Brownmiller, Susan. Shirley Chisholm, A Biography, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971.

Burt, Olive. First Woman Editor, Sarah J. Hale. New York, N.Y.: Julian Messner, 1960.

Clarke, Mary Stetson. Bloomers and Ballots, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Women's Rights. New York, N.Y.: Viking, 1972.

Davidson, Margaret. The Story of Eleanor Roosevelt. New York: N.Y.: Four Winds Press, 1968.

Faber, Doris. Bella Abzug. Illustrated with photographs. New York, N.Y.: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1976.

Garst, Shannon. Amelia Earhart, Heroine of the Skies. New York: N.Y.: Julian Messner, 1947.

Haskins, James. Barbara Jordan. New York, N.Y.: The Dial Press, 1977.

McKown, Robin. The World of Mary Cassatt. Illustrated with photographs. New York, N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972.

Meigs, Cornelia. Invincible Louisa. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1968.

Scott, John Anthony. Fanny Kemble's America. Illustrated with photographs. New York, N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973.

Taylor, Paula. Coretta King, A Woman of Peace. Illustrated by Harold Henriksen. Mankato, Minn.: Creative Education, 1974.